



EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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Distal and **Proximal** Vision in Education

Multi-Perspective Research

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Premise

Both in Europe and globally, research perspectives which correspond to **two differing visions of education**, one **distal** and the other **proximal** (Cooper and Law 1995), have become consolidated.

In our contribution **Distal** and **Proximal** are the metaphorical images and represent, in other words, the distance between qualitative and quantitative analysis in educational research.



The distal vision

Regards mainly quantitative research to which extensive public funding is dedicated and is framed within institutional comparative programmes.

The wealth of data should supply empirical evidence useful to educational staff and government legislators.

Research based on empirical evidence and quantitative comparative analysis possesses great impact in terms of policy support, but in many cases has little depth and pertinence in real contexts.



Proximal visionqualitative approach

This highlights the changing phenomena in local educational contexts, the cultural and material situated practices in educational processes, the relationships between individuals and between individuals and things, the professional roles of school staff and how social, space, material objects, cultural vision, etc. constructs processes and educational practices.



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**We want to tell you our experience:
the possibility to combine, in the
educational research, distal and
proximal view, qualitative and
quantitative analysis.**

Research focus

1. We propose to investigate these opposite visions and attempt to integrate them and challenge the epistemological distance between them.
2. In our view, cultural and methodological opposition, together with mutual non-recognition, are now working in collaboration within this context.
3. We intend to reflect on whether different methodological and analytical visions can exist together and produce mutually connected interpretations and unexpected comparable results.

Distal vision: the case of international data

Four factors

- 1) In the last 20 years, there has been a push towards uniformity of national education systems (especially in European Union countries);
- 2) At the same time, there has been a tendency towards decentralization of management skills and decision-making to local players;
- 3) The diffusion of international and national ratings is linked to these trends and performance outcomes.
- 4) In analysis of educational systems, there is also widespread use of test-based international surveys (PIRLS, TIMSS, PISA, IALS/SIAL, ALL).

What's the problem?

The data produced in these surveys is "theory laden" but, at the same time, in the presentation of results (international reports, ranking systems, etc.), the theory that supports the data is *hidden*.

The *hidden* theories and the use of the data as “entities” produces a reification of the data itself which is full of implications.

But this is not the only issue ... data as “entities” - or "objective facts" - acquires its social materiality when adopted by policy makers (or researchers) uncritically.

The objectified data justifies discourse and actions that affect the reputation of an educational system, its teachers and its schools as a whole.

What's the problem (again)?

In mainstream sociology of education, most international comparative research is quantitative. These studies are based on the comparison of specific indicators or sets of indicators.

Indicators summarize some phenomena well, but tend to *flatten* others (or make them invisible).

Benchmarking of various types of performance based on datasets from international surveys rarely gets to the heart of everyday school practice (due to scarcity of sources, purely methodological issues, etc.).

A possible way out (1)

If deconstructed and interpreted, the quantitative data - "anchored" to the context of the survey - becomes a powerful analytical tool.

These data sources allow us to test segments of theories empirically, taking both the individual, the meso and macro aspects into account.

The richness of the dataset produced by these surveys also allows us to take into account a large number of independent variables at both individual and school level.

Furthermore, this type of data permits the analysis of theoretically based achievements aimed at understanding the processes and interconnections that produce "output".

A possible way out (2)

From our viewpoint, the rejection of quantitative tools is not necessary, but we need greater methodological awareness, greater interplay between theoretical development and empirical analysis, together with a return to theory and the strengthening of studies based on combined qualitative and quantitative methodology.

One practical example

In the different cycles of the PISA survey, Italy appears to be a country which is highly inefficient in terms of average performance, but fair enough from the viewpoint of the impact of social background on student performance.

If we disaggregate the data, we can see that the PISA average performance eliminates a variance *between* regions which is much greater than the variance *within* them. There are both regions with a performance comparable to that of Finland, and regions with a very poor performance.

In addition, social origin generates a reproduction of educational inequalities mediated by the choice of school track.



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A proximal vision ...qualitative perspective

permits us to closely observe and highlight hidden practices which cannot be deduced from the mere figures of quantitative analysis.

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Case studies:

Innovation in teaching practices in schools

Qualitative methods (interviews, observation, shadowing, documentary analysis, photos, videos) allow us to analyze many innovations in teaching (experimentation, innovative objects and their use, the relationships between students and educators, the relationships between students, the relationships between students and objects, the situated context of innovation, the process of its production, its eventual failure, the specific use of ICT etc.) in detail.



A new perspective?

- if the two macro frames are used in a mixed perspective,
- if the research issues are hybridized and shared,
- if the main general aims are compatible,
- if the researchers, albeit from different theoretical approaches and possess same objectives,

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the two macro frames, while different from an epistemological and methodological point of view, can provide us with greater density of analysis in order to better understand the educational phenomena under investigation.

A new perspective?

Quantitative

Qualitative

“We need to cultivate new common ground”



“Zoom” on the differences

Contextualization

“Processualization”

Socio-materiality

Non-reification of data

Education

Exemplary cases

Social relevance of objects

Data is a social construction

Analysis of sociomaterial assemblages

Analysis of the networks

Multi-situated ethnography

Beyond the average!

Analysis of networks of practice



“Extra effort on the both sides”

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Thanks!

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